

[Principal of Grammar School]

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Mary Wright Hill (Negro)

525 West Hancock Avenue

Athens, Georgia

Principal of Grammar School

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PRINCIPAL OF GRAMMAR SCHOOL THIRTY-THREE YEARS

"Do have a chair. They don't look so comfortable, but they are. I'm proud of them even if they are old and out of date. My daughter wants me to sell them, but I don't intend to as long as I live because they were sent to me from Africa as a wedding gift. Bishop Harrison of Atlanta was stationed there, and as he was a good friend of our family I sent him an invitation to my wedding. These are what I got from him for a wedding gift. You'll have to excuse me a minute. I picked a gallon of figs from my own bush this morning and had just put them on the stove to make preserves; they'll burn if I don't cut the electric current from under them."

Martha is of medium height and weight. Her curly black hair is streaked with gray and is cut very short in the back, which causes it to bush out around her face. She wears glasses and has piercing brown eyes. She was wearing a blue print dress buttoned down the back, black slippers and tan hose. Her dress was none too clean, and the hose were spotted and soiled. I thought the large smudge of soot on her arm was a birthmark until she took the hem of her dress and tried to wipe it off. The contents of the room were very old but

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well arranged, and the general appearance showed the use of a broom had long been neglected.

She soon returned, saying to me, "I will have to talk briefly because this is my husband's busy day and I have to help him. He is an interior decorator and has a large order of shades to put up at the co-ordinate college. I went with him out to Winterville last night to hang curtains he made for a lady. No, mam, I don't know what he makes for we have never asked each other that question, 2 because he has his profession and I have mine. He makes a living all right and says he has never been without a day's work in his life. He works hard and saves some for a rainy day.

"No, I wasn't borned in Athens. I came here to teach. My mother and father were born in Greenville, North Carolina. [After?] they married they moved to Asheville, and there is where I was born on March 6, 1881. As you can see, I am more Indian and French than Negro. My grandmother was a Negro and my grandfather was an Indian. On my grandfather's side his mother was a Negro and his father a Frenchman. When Atlanta was on a building boom he moved his family there, where he could get plenty of work to do. He was a contractor for brick work. He made plenty of money, bought a home there, and educated the three oldest children. There were six of we children, all educated from Atlanta University, but one who graduates at Tuskegee under Booker T. Washington. He took up the same trade as my father.

"My father died when I was seven years of age. Before I finished high school my mother became an invalid, and before I finished Atlanta University she lost her eyesight. My desire was to become a medical doctor. Not having funds and no one to help me, I chose teaching to help my mother and educate the younger children. My older brother and sisters helped my mother and sent me to college, but I paid most of my own way working at school while I was there.

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"After I had to quit school I was given a place teaching at Oxford, Georgia, at the age of thirteen. There were two grown people teaching under me. I was paid \$30 a month. With that amount my living came out of it and the rest sent home to my mother. After teaching at Oxford two years I accepted work in Athens. I taught school out here in a section called Brooklyn. I taught at Brooklyn school two years making \$35 a month. At the end of that time I was elected principal of East Athens School, there I am now serving and have been there thirty-three 3 years this past January.

"I was the first female colored woman to be elected principal in Athens. There was a woman appointed to fill an unexpired term, but I was the first woman elected to serve. I filled the vacancy of the principal, who accepted a position in Panama for \$100, and he only made \$40 here.

"When I first took the place as principal it was just a four-room wooden building with no modern conveniences. The toilets were just topsoil privies, and we get our drinking water from wells. The enrollment was around one hundred and ninety children for the five grades, and three teachers. The school has grown to a ten-room building, has ['sanisap'?] toilets, running water, electric lights, and a telephone. The enrollment used to run as high as six hundred; now we have around four hundred and fifty pupils and eight teachers. One reason our attendance have decreased in that section, lots of the Negroes have moved North in order to find work, as there are not enough work here for everybody, and people are not able to pay a high price for colored help.

"I would like to tell you how I managed to get running water in that school. Not long after I took charge and began to drink that well water I began to feel bad and didn't feel like doing my work as it should be done. No matter how hard I talked to the city officials they wouldn't do anything about it. I took my drinking water from home and began to work on the State Board of Health about the conditions of the water in the section. They seat a representative down to investigate the matter. They asked me a million questions, of which they had a perfect right to do. I sent a boy to the well to get a fresh bucket of water and

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saw to it that the bottle I put the sample in was thoroughly clean. They took it and went on back to Atlanta. In about a month I got a report on that water. Headquarters said they didn't understand why there wasn't typhoid fever and other contagious diseases over there. Water was put in and not long after that the 4 Principal of [Grammar?] School Thirty-three Years

Health Department here employed a young lady to examine all those things as they were brought to the attention of the department, and specimens were brought in to be examined.

I have done everything over there but marry a couple and [embalm?] a body because of financial conditions which existed in that service. I used to teach the fifth grade. Seeing that wouldn't work, because the children who reached me I found didn't have a good foundation in the beginning. For it's like this - the first grade is [where?] the children get their foundation for the fundamentals of school work. If they are started wrong they will have a time for the rest of their lives.

"The [?] I have seen over there would make you sick. Often I have had a [kid?] come to school sick. Their parents at work, I have put a pallet on the floor by the heater many days and lay a sick child on it, give them milk and food, and take that child home or to some friend's house until the mother came home late in the afternoon. When I first started teaching in the school, I wore my good clothes. I have looked down on my dress and see lice crawling on it, or have a sick child to vomit, or have a bowel action and get it on me. I decided to wear white dresses in order to see the lice when they fell on my white dress. I have had people ask me, 'why do you wear white dresses to school the year round? Are you not a nurse?' I would give them some nice answer and go on.

"I found it was necessary to know something about nursing and the care of children, not only my own, but those I taught. So I took a [correspondence?] course by mail and received my diploma from the Chatauqua School of Nursing, at Jamestown, New York.

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That course has been my salvation in caring for those children. Now when things [like?] I have just mentioned occur, I immediately get the [mercurochrome?] and wet their head in it. It kills every nit and louse on a child's head.

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Principal of Grammar School Thirty-three Years

"The school is in a Baptist center. I had an awful time when I first went over there. The first exercise was a perfect flop, as those people are on the order of Primitive Baptist. If the children had to skip or take a few steps that looked like dancing their mother would take 'em out. Now they are educated to know all those things help a child to have grace and poise, as well as to help them overcome their timidity to perform before a crowd.

"Oh, I always have enemies and there are plenty of men and women who would stoop to do anything to get my job. The superintendent called me in his office one day. I couldn't imagine what he wanted. He said, 'martha, I want to talk to you about your work, for you may have heard there are some of your race trying to get your place, but I don't want you to worry about it, so long as you are doing as fine work as you are now. Two men came in my office the other day and one of them said to me, "I understand you have an opening." "An opening for what," I asked? Well", I told him, "I don't have an opening for a man and I won't have one for you soon." 'I thanked the superintendent and left his office. That shows you how people will do you behind your back.

"I started in at \$40 a month, but I have made \$135. We teachers have been cut so I am ashamed to tell anybody what I make now. Aside from being the first woman principal, I was the first Negro woman to volunteer in this section to teach the illiterate adults, to raise Georgia in the seals of illiteracy, because she was way down. This school operated ten years and the board paid as \$25 a month for nine years. I gave my services free the first year. We had an enrollment of over one hundred Negroes who could neither read or write. The classes were held two nights a week, Tuesday and Thursday, from eight until ten

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o'clock. The school closed because the Board of Education did not have money enough to pay the teachers.

"Also I have taught social service work for ten years. A representative 6 from Washington, D. C., came down to thank me for my work. There was a contest put on in three large cities and some way Athens pulled strings and got it for the one small town to compete with all the schools here doing outstanding child health demonstration work. When I put on that demonstration and wrote my thesis I had a dream I would be the winner. When I was notified I had won the trophy, I couldn't believe my ears. And the funniest thing about it the [superintendent?] of our city schools didn't want me to take it home with me. His secretary said, 'Why, it doesn't belong to city. It was given by the [?] and the Notary to the individual winning it. So by rights it belongs to Martha and we have no right to keep it.' Very reluctantly he presented the cup to me, saying. 'You should have civic pride enough to put it on display where everyone could see it.' I told him I surely had that and asked one of the jewelers to place it in their display windows for me. The jeweler did and insisted that I should let him polish it for me, but I liked it dull best.

Before I came to Athens to teach my mother called me to her, saying, 'daughter, there is something I want you to do. You know my days are numbered, and after I am gone there will be nobody to educate my younger children but you, so just as soon as you find a good man I want you to marry and make a home for yourself and the children, and educate them.' 'But, mama,' I said, 'why don't you tell [Dora?] that. She is older than I and, too, I want to study and become a medical doctor.' She plead with me and finally I told her I would. Soon after I came here to teach I met my first husband. We decided to marry. I had said I was going to have a church wedding and it took me two years to buy my clothes, as I had to send a certain part of my salary to my mother, as my sister was at Atlanta University and my brother was attending Tuskegee.

"My wedding dress and veil was beautiful and I paid a modiste who was well known in Atlanta \$12.50 to make my wedding gown. I paid for every detail myself 7 connected with

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the wedding except my bouquet, the flowers for the [bridesmaids?], and [boutonnieres?] for the groomsmen. We were married on Christmas Day. One year from that day my oldest child was born, and eighteen months later another little girl [came?]. She was born on the Fourth of July. I just have the two girls. My oldest girl was four and a half years old when my husband died.

“We had just bought this home and he had just made one payment. I was determined not to lose it, and I set out to work harder than ever. I have taught all day and nursed at night. In the summer I closed my house, paid one of my sisters to keep my girls, and nursed the summer through. The girls went to the same school where I am principal. After they finished grammar school, they went to high school. After finishing there I sent my oldest girl to Fisk University, and the other one finished Atlanta University. My oldest daughter got her degree at Fisk University majoring in history. After she left Fisk she taught in Springfield College in Springfield, Massachusetts. Her most outstanding work was done as social worker at that college. she was selected one of the two colored girls in America to travel in Europe with a group of white students to study students in other countries. She visited Italy, Germany, Austria, Hungary, France, Switzerland, and England. While in England a lady took a fancy to her and presented her with a lovely ring. It surely made the other students jealous. Now you need not mention this, for if you do, the Negroes will say if they know I told you, ‘Old lady Martin is bragging’. Negroes are just like [magpies?], always jabbering about what people are proud of. You bet I am, for I worked hard for my children and they have done well.

“The first time my daughter was offered that trip to Europe she couldn't accept it as we didn't have the money, but she told them she would be ready the next time that trip was offered to her. That trip cost us two thousand dollars. The head of the social work in New York sent a representative down to see if Viola had everything she needed. She went all through her clothes, checked her linen, and the 8 only thing she didn't have was an air cushion to sit on while traveling in Europe. You know all the trains have wooden seats. I

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couldn't find one in Athens. Viola went to [Atlanta?] [it?] and paid \$6 for that cushion. Then she returned from abroad she told me that \$6 was well spent.

"That social worker told me while she was here, she had no idea Negroes in the South knew what such environment was or that they had such nice homes. We took her back to the hotel in our car. Don't misunderstand me, I am a Southern Negro and know my place. Therefore we treated her as we knew and were taught to act around white people. When she invited us to her room to have tea we refused, knowing the excitement it would create following a white woman in a hotel to have tea.

"My other daughter didn't apply herself, so she didn't do as well as the one I have just told you about. She got a job in New York as social worker. She met and married a musician. Nanette made good money, so her husband gave up his orchestra and sat down on her to support him. She had to stop work after her second child came. She lost her job and couldn't find work. After divorcing her husband, she got a job with the WPA as social worker and now is getting/ on all right.

"Viola married an Atlanta man. She has a little girl of her own and don't work any more. I often tell her she ought to do something after all the money she and I have spent on her education. However, I am proud of the man she married and hope they will make a go of it. I gave both of my girls church weddings, and as I have told you about my race, you have never heard of such a to-do as they did make over the girls' church weddings, and every one/ I heard that had anything ugly to say about it we excluded them from among our invited guests.

"I stayed single fourteen years before I married again, because I didn't want any other man having a say-so over my children. When I did marry after the girls were grown and cut on their own, the man was an overgrown, spoiled man. His people had money, and he thought because I had a nice home and a good job he would let me take care of him. I gave him all the chance in the world to get out and hunt work, still he wouldn't do it. So one

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day I said to him, 'Look here, haven't you found any work yet?' After I learned he hadn't tried, I told him it was time to get going. He thought I didn't mean it at first. When I let him know I meant what I said, he went back to his mother. About a month later she brought him back to me and begged me to take him back. I asked him if he had a job, and he told me he thought so. 'Well,' I told him, 'you didn't bring anything with you but yourself and a few clothes in a trunk, and you haven't bought one thing since you have been here. Now get your belongings and get out for good. This time I mean for you to stay out.'

"About three years ago I married my present husband, after I had got my divorce from my second husband. He is a good man and hard working. We work together and save our money so when we get too old to work we will have something to live on. He is getting old. He will be sixty-nine his next birthday and I do all I can to help him. I drive him where he has to go in my car. That saves him lots of steps. He is good to me and I try to be to him.

"He owns his own property but has it rented out. I didn't want to live in his house, so he stored his furniture and I am much happier where I have always lived. Many are the nights I have stayed awake crying when my children were asleep, wondering what I would do next and how to meet my bills, but I always found a way. Now I don't owe any money, and I rent another house I have built on the back of my lot. This was a large lot and I have often thought about that wasted space. So when I got this one paid for I bought lumber and had a nice four-room house built, and rent from it paid for the lumber. This house I live in has ten rooms. Come on and let as show it to you. I am proud of it because it represents many a hard day's work and worry."

I followed her into a bedroom. She continued to talk. "You can see how old 10 my furniture is. Why, every piece in this room is at least thirty years old. You will have to excuse the dirt and dust, as we just came back Monday from a visit to my husband's daughters in Ohio." She laughed and said, "They wanted to see what their new step-mother looked like, so they sent us the money to go on. After visiting them for two weeks, we went to see my

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people in Chicago, then on to New York to visit my daughter. While there we took in the World's Fair.

"Come In here. I call this small room a den. I fixed this up for my husband so when his customers come he can work out their plans without being bothered." In this room was a studio couch with many bright cushions on it, Morris chair, desk, bookcase, a table with an electric lamp on it. On the floor was a gay-colored wool rug, while at the short windows were pink [?] curtains and red drapes. She picked up a small notebook from the arm of the Morris chair, saying, "Well, bless my time, here is the book my husband has been looking for ever since he came back from our trip. This book he keeps his orders in and the style of curtains and draperies he draws for the customers. He will be lost without it, as he has several orders to fill right away. Now, come, let me show you the kitchen. You see I have all modern equipment as we are not able to hire our work done. Our electric stove and refrigerator are a perfect joy.

"As you can see, all the furniture in my diningroom is real old. Look at that fruit basket of Brearden china. Aren't those colors delicate and pretty? In this china cabinet I have several very old pieces of head-painted china. I want you to look at that tureen on the buffet. I never saw one like it before and I have never used it for fear of breaking it. The lamp on my dining table was a gift from a young man in California, in appreciation for what I did for his mother. I took my daughters out to Los Angeles on a visit to some school friends of mine. While I was there the woman next door was taken violently ill. We ran over to see what we could do for her. I administered first aid until the doctor arrived to keep her 11 alive. When he arrived we both worked like wildfire to save her, but nothing revived her. She died three hours later with her head on my arm.

"Our time was up for us to leave to visit other places in that state. Before leaving I did all I could about the funeral arrangements before her only child could get there from Denver. After visiting several cities, we arrived home. Three weeks later I found a huge box at my front door, and when I unpacked it this is what I found. This bust of an Indian woman I

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bought while in Chicago. My girls laughed at me, but I didn't care. The only interest I had in it is because my mother was the image of that bust in her last days. I told you in the beginning I am more Indian and French than Negro. We are descendants of the Cherokee Indians, and my mother was only one-eighth Negro. The corner of the bust got broken some way, but I wouldn't take the world for it.

"I want you to see the room I pride more than any of the others in the house, because every place of the furniture in my living room was a wedding gift from my first husband, and other odds and ends are from close friends. A furniture store here offered me \$75 for this suite, but I told him that was my price for the chairs only. Of course, the radio, piano, and that end table my trophy sits on are modern, but I have had them at least twenty years. Do you see those two large pictures of child subjects on the wall? One of my daughters told me they were so old-fashioned and out-of-date why didn't I take them to the back room. I told her they suited me and I meant to keep them where I could see them as long as I lived, for they represented the first money I ever made when I was eight years old. I kept a colored woman's children for her while she worked out for white people. She paid me \$1.50 a week. I gave a \$1 of it to my mother and put 50cts of it on the pictures. They cost \$2.50 each, and I paid on them each week until I finished paying for them.

"No, man, I never worked for white people. Therefore, I missed my only chance 12 of ever going to Europe. There was a very wealthy white man in Atlanta whose daughter married. He begged me to go with her as her maid to Europe, as he wanted an educated person who was old enough to advise her. Not having worked for white people, I was afraid I wouldn't fill my place efficiently at that age, so they sent to Washington and got a maid who was educated and had some knowledge of nursing.

"Come in the hall. I want to show you a picture of my mother that was taken after she went blind. I paid a photographer \$25 to make that picture for me. One of my white friends who was a teacher - she is dead now - had a larger picture of the Madonna to fall from the wall in her room, and the corner was broken off the frame, and there were large dirty places

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on the canvas. The school wanted to have it repaired for her, but she told them, 'No, give it to Martha for her school. She will know just what to do with it. I took some brown wax crayon, went over the soiled places, and put each tiny piece of the broken frame back in place. It is now in my assembly room, and you can't even tell where the damaged part was. Every one of my friends know how I love pictures. That is why that lady gave me her broken picture.

"I want to show you upstairs. When the girls began to get large enough to have a room of their own, I had the roof of the house raised and added these bedrooms, bath, and sleeping porch. It is awfully hot up here. I don't use it now only when the girls come home on a visit. After I went to all this expense, my girls left home. this front room is Viola's. If you notice I have furnished the room in the color suited to her name in curtains at the window, scarves and bedspread, and scatter rugs. You can see the furniture is cheap, but good enough for us.

"This is my youngest daughter's room. It is done in pink. She isn't as fixy as Viola, and anything I did for her was all right, so that's why she had an iron bed and the other bed is wooden. Both rooms are just like they left them. This large room isn't as nice, so when they had company the girls slept in here with me.

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As you can see the furniture in this room are odds and ends of very old furniture.

"The coolest room up here is the sleeping porch". I followed her down the steps, through a curtain, and entered a small hall. The door in front of me opened into the bath room. Martha said, "I had this old wardrobe fitted in this space of the hall to hold my linens." She opened the double doors, and every shelf was filled with various household linens, put on the shelves at random. "This is the sleeping porch," she said, opening the door that leads into the room. There was a white iron bed with a candlewick spread on it, large dark oak dresser, and table with with a reading lamp on it. Martha said, "I am ashamed for you to

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see this room, everything so torn up. Clothes everywhere, but I did want you to see this old desk. My first husband was a barber and was employed by a [Corman?], who when he went out of business gave it to my husband as a gift of appreciation for his faithful work. The man brought it to America from Germany when he came over.

“Let's go downstairs. I want to show you the goldfish pool. I made it myself with the help of a young boy I paid 50cts.” When we reached the porch, she said, “Come this way to the terrace. Here is my pool. The water lilies haven't done so well this year. On real hot nights I come out here and sit in the [pergola?]. I am proud of my house because I bought and paid for it myself, which represents several thousand dollars. I get \$10 a month for the one you see back of my house. Lots of Negroes will spend everything they make on their back, things to eat, and a car, but I try to even mine up, and I didn't buy my Dodge until I felt I could afford it.

“[Then?] my children were small, up the street nearer town, nothing but Jews lived along there. They used to tell me, ‘martha, your children are going to be bowlegged, you walk them so far back and forth to school. Why don't you take a streetcar’ ‘Because I can't afford it.’ I would tell them. ‘that 30cts a day would buy food for us.’ They stayed well, for I learned in my course the proper food to give them and 14 how to prepare it. Therefore, I have been fortunate when it came to doctor bills.

“I contribute my success to hard work, saving, and praying. I joined the church when I was eleven years of age and am a member of the First Congregational Church of Atlanta, Georgia, and I promised the Lord if he would help me I would live a good Christian life and teach others the way they should live. When my children came and were old enough to understand I did my best to instill in them the way they should live. They have never disappointed me, and as a whole I am very proud of my family, for as far as I have been able to learn, generations back, all my people have been good Christian men and women.

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“Yes, mam. I mean to teach as long as the Board of Education will let me. I put all there is in me in my work. Many a teacher goes to school and teaches enough to get by on. That isn't the way I do. While I am not teaching I am thinking of the children next fall, planning my work, things that are best for the children. So many children go to school without a scrap of paper or a pencil. During the summer I save every piece of paper that is useable and every pencil I find. Lots of times I find one in the street, and I pick it up even if they are not more than one or two inches long. Now next fall when school opens, when a child don't have pencil or paper, there will be plenty for those who need it.”

Her husband came to the door and called his wife. “Baby, I am ready to go hang those shades now. Miss, if you hear of anybody who wants interior decorating done, I would appreciate it if you would tell them about me.”

After thanking Martha for the story and telling her husband I would keep his work in mind, I left them scurrying toward the car with an armful of shades.